
Mei Zhang: China's Poor Regions. Rural-Urban Migration, Poverty, Economic Reform and Urbanization.

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- 1 Migration and poverty are certainly two major intertwined issues for contemporary China. Although poverty has decreased rapidly during the last decades, thanks to growth and specific policies, it remains a subject of concern. The absolute number of poor (about 30 million) is still large and they are concentrated in areas—remote rural places and minority regions—that seem to be excluded from the surge in prosperity brought about by the economic reforms. As such, poverty is only one aspect of an unbalanced growth process that is becoming a source of alarm, including at the topmost levels of the state.
- 2 The difference in growth rate in this development across China is the main reason for the mass migration that China is currently experiencing. It is well known that the floating population is currently in the order of 100 to 150 million individuals, despite the *Hukou* system that restricts migration and makes it costly. This raises several important questions. To what extent is migration a solution to poverty in rural areas? Does it simply displace poverty to urban areas, leading to a “lumpen” urban population, or is it effective reallocation of the labour force where most needed, and that benefits everyone? Is migration a desirable substitute for economic development in the rural sector?
- 3 In this context, Mei Zhang's contribution is very welcome for its in-depth analysis of a number of dimensions of rural-urban migration. This work is based on an extensive survey carried out in 1997-1998 in rural counties of Shanxi province, south-west of Beijing, a poor area, with 14% of the population below the poverty line. It has low agricultural productivity and its main activity is coal extraction. As such, it is an excellent case study, although its out-migration is rarely directed towards the southern coastal areas that attract most of China's migrants. The survey methodology is sound,

interviewing 100 households that include migrants and 100 households that do not, selected at random in four villages, and submitted comprehensive semi-directive interviews. Of particular importance are the interviews of migrants *at their place of destination*. This is invaluable input to this kind of work because such matched “sending area-destination area” data is too often missing in migration analysis.

- 4 The book starts with an interesting survey of the economic literature on internal migration, a very classical topic in development economics since the late 1940s. Although the author is not expected to go into the detail of the huge amount of literature on this subject, I feel a discussion of the doubts that Harris and Todaro's contribution raised in the political spheres over the desirability of mass migration is lacking. This should be contrasted with the more liberal views that have been presented later in defence of the balancing beneficial effects of migration. It seems to me that this debate is at the core of the interpretation of the Chinese situation today.
- 5 Chapter 2 provides a great deal of background on both poverty and migration in China. It provides many very useful figures and details on institutional arrangements, policies and reforms implemented in recent decades. Several programmes aiming at poverty alleviation have been and still are implemented, and the author argues that facilitating rural-urban migration has been considered a relatively cheap instrument for such plans. As a matter of fact, she goes on to show that there is some trend towards facilitating migration and removing the more rigid aspects of the Hukou system. It is unclear, however, whether there is anything *aiming* at poverty reduction in China's domestic migration policy. First, an anti-poverty policy would put more emphasis on formal migration (*qianyi*) than on temporary migration (*renkou liudong*). Second, an anti-poverty policy would not regulate migration with expensive permits and documents. Obviously, migration policy is rather a mix of providing an affordable workforce to the urban development process and sheltering the native urban population from the labour market and social pressures of the migrant influx. That this also has poverty reduction virtues is quite possible.
- 6 Chapter 3 details the survey methodology already mentioned, which makes this data a rare source of information. Chapters 4 and 5 are the building blocks of the book: they first describe migrant and non-migrant households in their home areas (Chapter 4), then migrant individuals in their destination areas (Chapter 5). This structure clarifies the exposition, but it does not lead to a systematic analysis of the home households/sent individuals interaction. Maybe a different organisation would have put more emphasis on the link between the two, which is the great originality and strength of the data. Yet, the comparison of migrant and non-migrant households in Chapter 4 offers a unique description of the process of sending members outside the village. Some of the findings confirm documented features: migrants are young, male, with average education; the presence of fellow migrant villagers determines the place of migration and offers useful information channels; social ties between the migrant and his family remain strong. It is very interesting to note that the households more likely to have members who will become migrant workers are in the middle of the income range: the very poor cannot afford the cost of migration; the rich find the value of migration to be low and are reluctant to take the “low-class jobs” they may have to take in cities. Mei Zhang can also quantify the remittances at about 2,000-4,000 yuan per year, which is considerably higher than income from agriculture and even from non-agricultural activities nearby. Unfortunately for rural development, it seems that remittances are

not invested in agricultural or business investment. The author argues that the Shanxi economic environment may not be sufficiently favourable. Instead, the majority of remittances are consumed in building and refurbishing houses.

- 7 Chapter 5 gives a finely shaded description of migrant positions. Migrant workers are found mainly in the construction sector, but also in the coal industry, which is important to Shanxi's economy, and in the manufacturing sector. About half of them work in state-owned units. They generally have unskilled status (miner, porter, rubbish collector, etc.), but their incomes are in line with those of formal workers: a result of longer working hours. In addition, they do not benefit from the welfare contributions provided to other workers: accident and medical insurance, and accommodation and pension schemes. Still, many migrants claim that they do not want to go back to the countryside nor become farmers again: a reason for enduring such bad amenities.
- 8 The final chapter goes back to the underlying question: can rural-urban migration resolve rural poverty? Although cautious, Mei Zhang's answer is rather yes, mainly in view of the significant remittances. But there are two issues that could be considered more closely. First, it is not clear that observed remittances do benefit the poor within rural areas, especially because, as I understand, migrants do not generally come from the poorest households. I believe that the author would have data to evaluate the amount of remittances by household initial income level. Second, following a long tradition, the author considers that migration has little cost in terms of agricultural production because there is surplus labour in this sector. One should be careful, however, that migrants can be among the most productive workers, so that the opportunity cost of their migration can be high. Indeed, the author mentions a possible "brain-drain" effect. Again, this could be considered more systematically. In the end, it is arguable that income levels in rural areas increase as a result of migration, even if the impact on actual poverty levels is unclear. But this comes at a cost: living conditions of migrants in urban areas, with respect to natives. If poverty is to be a relative concept, migrants may have become, in this sense, even poorer than they used to be.